



KETCHIKAN DAILY NEWS

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Few fish return to Unuk

By SCOTT BOWLEN

Daily News Staff Writer

Forest Service observers saw very few eulachon at the Unuk River this spring, the sixth-straight year without a sizable return of the small smelt that are popular as a traditional subsistence food.

Just 46 live eulachon were observed by agency personnel who monitored the Unuk River area from March 10 through April 12, according to the Forest Service monitoring summary.

"Unuk River eulachon escapement was nearly absent again in 2009," states the summary.

The Forest Service, which has been monitoring eulachon runs at the Unuk River/Burroughs Bay area intensively since 2001, has found fewer than 100 eulachon there each year beginning in 2005.

Historically, the Unuk had been a regular producer of eulachon, an oily fish that's rendered for its prized "grease."

The last commercial harvest at the Unuk was in 1999, when fishermen landed 10,200 pounds of eulachon, according to State of Alaska.

There were state personal use and federal subsistence fisheries during the early 2000s, with catches estimated at 4,300 pounds in 2002, and 18,700 pounds in 2001, according to federal data.

The last sizable harvest occurred in 2003, when a mostly federal subsistence harvest landed about 18,500 pounds. The 2004 harvest was about 1,500 pounds, according to Forest Service records.

No fish were harvested in 2005, when fewer than 100 eulachon were seen in the area.

Federal and state managers have closed the area to subsistence and personal use fishing for eulachon since 2006.

Eulachon usually return to spawn as 3-year-old fish, according to the Forest Service.

In 2009, as in recent years, the Forest Service sent a monitoring crew to the Unuk River/Burroughs Bay area for several weeks to survey the area for eulachon.

Cold weather and substantial river icing delayed the crews arrival this year.

They conducted 92 foot surveys and 46 boat surveys in the 12 areas that they monitor each year, according to the monitoring summary.

"Until river ice was broken up and moved out, access was limited and visibility poor," according to the Forest Service.

Monitors saw very few of the sea gulls and sea lions typically associated with a good return of eulachon.

"Predatory marine animal and bird activity was nearly absent," states the summary. "Individual harbor seals, a few eagles, and the usual groups of mergansers were observed."

There was no indication of spawning by eulachon, most of which were seen in a small area of Matney Slough. Other individual fish or small groups were observed in other survey areas, according to the summary.

Aerial surveys of the Burroughs Bay, Chickamin River and Walker Cove areas observed "no notable activity" of birds and marine mammals that would indicate eulachon activity.

Although eulachon returns to the Unuk River appeared slim this year, stronger returns were





reported at the Stikine River near Wrangell, and at the Nass River near Prince Rupert, British Columbia.

Tom Cady, a fisheries biologist with the Forest Service Wrangell Ranger District, said that district doesn't monitor for eulachon like the Ketchikan/Misty Fiords Ranger District does at the Unuk River.

"Any information we have is generally just anecdotal in terms of what the public provides us," Cady said. "From what I heard this year, the run was good, comparable to any number of past years. The people that went fishing found their fish."

The agency doesn't have a way to measure eulachon harvest at the Stikine because there are no federal or state permit requirements, according to Cady.

Eulachon fishing also sounded positive south of the border, although there was significant icing on area rivers.

"For the Nass (River), there was up to three feet of ice in the normal fishing areas," said Mark Potyrala, a fisheries management biologist with the Canadian Department in Prince Rupert, British Columbia.

"Once they were able to deal with that issue - which basically just meant cutting through the ice - the fishing was very good. It was so good that grease needs were met, the food needs were met," he said. "And there was plenty extra to pass around to all the surrounding (First) Nations as well that were making requests."

DFO doesn't have a measure of the quantity of eulachon harvested, but Potyrala said he knows that the grease is of good quality.

"They did get a good amount of females. That means they got the early part of the run, so that means the grease is going to be good," he said.

The Nass fish were smaller than usual, said Potyrala.

Over on the Skeena River, the harvest of eulachon by First Nations was minimal because of the icing conditions, he said.

"Even for the dipping sites, they were frozen and just unavailable," Potyrala said.

Looking farther south, it appeared that eulachon abundance along the coast was up over previous years, including as far as the Columbia River in Oregon, according to Potyrala.

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in March announced that it was proposing to list a "southern" population of eulachon as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The eulachon population that NOAA is considering extends from northern California up to the Nass River in British Columbia, according to the NOAA Fisheries Service announcement of March 13 in the Federal Register.

At present, NOAA isn't considering the Unuk River eulachon as part of the southern population stock that's being proposed for ESA listing, according to Eric Murray of NOAA Fisheries office in Portland, Ore.

The agency would consider including the Unuk River if information is submitted indicating that there is an issue, according to Murray.

The public comment period for the proposed listing ends Tuesday.

"Should these fish eventually be listed for federal protection, prohibitions against harming them would apply only to Pacific smelt in U.S. waters or to U.S. citizens on the high seas, even though the population extends into Canada," according to the announcement.

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